

Energy Development in the West



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service
Air Program

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Background

In the last several years, substantial construction of air-polluting industries, most notably coal-fired power plants, and unprecedented expansion of industrial oil and gas fields has occurred in the western US (**Fig 1**). Environmental analyses conducted for these developments have identified potential air pollution impacts to lands managed by the Forest Service. While development plans contain suggested mitigation measures, both effectiveness and enforcement remain uncertain. Because the pace and scale of development is unprecedented, there is concern that the potential impacts predicted in National Environmental Policy Act documents and state air quality permits will be realized or exceeded without adequate mitigation, enforcement of that mitigation, or sufficient monitoring for feedback and trends analysis.

Successes

The Forest Service Air Program has successfully negotiated emission control approaches that allow for increased levels of energy development while protecting resources on Forest Service administered lands. Surface water, acid deposition, and atmospheric aerosol monitoring have provided information to mitigate energy development emissions. The Air Program has also provided more assistance to reduce energy demands, including improvements in conservation and energy-use efficiency, biomass utilization, and sustainable operations.



Fig 1. Oil and gas development 20-30 km from the Bridger Wilderness.

Goals

Forest Service line officers are bound by the Clean Air Act to maintain and enhance air quality in Class I Wilderness areas managed by the agency (**Fig 2**). Forest Service line officers are responsible for managing Wilderness in accordance with the Wilderness Act.

Challenges

- Provide protection of vegetation, watershed and recreation resources given increasing emissions of pollutants that cause acid deposition and visibility impairment.
- Support Bureau of Land Management and Department of Interior accelerated energy development.
- Meet resource protection requirements under the Clean Air Act, Wilderness Act, and internal policy.
- Determine thresholds for sensitive resources and caps on emission levels.
- Coordinate multi-agency planning for development of energy resources.
- Decide when to permit additional development when uncertainties exist regarding cumulative impacts.
- Meet the minimum level of stewardship by 2014 as recommended by the Chief's Wilderness Advisory Group in the Ten Year Wilderness Stewardship Challenge.



Fig 2. Deep Lake, Bridger Wilderness.